APOCALYPTIC RHETORIC IN CLIMATE CHANGE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: This paper aims to detect the rhetorical moves in climate change debates in digital media environments. Digital media culture is the field of contention concerning climate change discourses of both activists and contrarians. One of the main communication strategies of climate change proponents is apocalyptic rhetoric, using various persuasive appeals, more or less effective (scare tactics, ethotic stances, danger frames, etc.). The opponents of anthropogenic climate change use rhetoric of ignorance, fallacious arguments, pseudoscience, and conspiracy theories, fueling controversy and public confusion concerning the issue. Ecomedia literacy equips media users to discern correct information and resist various fraudulent rhetorical tactics.

Keywords: Apocalyptic rhetoric, Framing, Climate change communication, Rhetoric of ignorance

1. Introduction

Every human society tends to create an catastrophic narrative (mythical, religious or scientific), a prophetic discourse that predicts the end of the world. Apocalyptic rhetoric, both secular and sacred, is a persistent discursive form, albeit constantly failing on the empirical level, which uses specific persuasive types of arguments and appeals.

There is a discrepancy between the body of knowledge in climate change science and a similar expertise in climate change communication, which induces confusion and distrust (Leal Filho *et alii*, 2019: 2-6). Moreover, the challenges of climate change communication consist in the complexity of the audiences, the difficulty to build public support for collective action and the effective rebuttal methods of climate misconceptions.

Climate change communication usually employs different forms of fear appeals, among which apocalyptic rhetoric is widely used to create awareness and disposition for action. However, fear appeals imply risks on the credibility of rhetors and on the receptivity of audiences.

Climate change communication constitutes a site of rhetorical struggle or contention over responsibility and agency. One persistent challenge of climate communication is represented by scare tactics and apocalyptic rhetorical strategies.

2. Rhetorical strategies in climate change communication

Rhetors create discourses using three main strategies, employing both arguments and figures: *ethos* (credibility); *logos* (structure and reasoning) and *pathos* (emotional appeals). Every discourse includes all three strategies, and, even if credibility and arguments are essential message ingredients, the audience disposition to action is created by emotional appeals. Fear and guilt can be some of the most effective emotional appeals, but there are certain caveats concerning their use, as we will discuss later.

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A communicator trying to persuade a public must understand thoroughly the rhetorical situation in which he/she operates, the specific arguments circulating about a particular issue, the social stakes and power dynamics concerning that matter and the structural barriers of constructing problems (Klöckner, 2015: 41). Since all arguments appear at some point conflict or *stasis*, the rhetor must find one shared question to move forward a resolution. *Stasis* theory guides communicators to investigate and to determine: the facts (conjecture); the meaning or nature of the issue (definition); the importance of the issue (quality or value) and the plan of action (procedure or policy).

In the rhetorical tradition, *stasis* provides a pragmatic strategy through which opponents can discern the exact point of disagreement (Crowley & Hawhee, 2012: 57). *Stases* are hierarchical, in the sense that arguments at the *stasis* of definition have already accepted the conjecture, arguments about value have already accepted both conjecture and definition, and arguments about policy have usually accepted conjecture, definition, and value.

Associated with stasis is the ancient rhetorical *principle of kairos.* The two basic elements of *kairos* are the principle of right timing and the principle of proper measure (Kinneavy, 2002: 60). Usually, they are merged into a single concept, although individual occurrences of the term may focus on one or the other aspect.

Time-based *kairos*, involves three distinct but related concepts (Smith, 2002: 52). There is the idea of the right timing for something. *Kairos* also means a time of tension, conflict, or crisis suggesting that the evolving situation requires a decision at that time (urgency, currency or immediacy). Finally, *kairos* means that the problem or crisis presents some opportunity for accomplishing certain purpose.

Using *kairos* also involves specific arguments that are currently circulating about a certain issue. The kairotic skill means understanding the perspective of the audience and adjusting the discourse discerningly. Using *kairos* furthermore involves understanding the specific arguments currently in debate about a certain issue. Considering the interests related to an issue can help a rhetor decide the best way to frame an argument for a specific audience at a particular time (Crowley & Hawhee, 2012: 45). To examine and provide arguments using *kairos* means to consider the power dynamics involved in a particular issue as well as the recent events and arguments encompassing it.

Based on *stasis* theory a rhetor can take a question and reframe it in at least three different ways. Rather than arguing from a presented point, it is often preferable to explore different *stases*, identifying which one works best, to respond from a point of highest effectiveness. If the rhetor can switch the question, he/she has a real advantage – especially if he can keep it changed.

Rhetors employ frames by deciding upon the most persuasive answer to the four questions of *stasis*, choosing the angle of the topic. The audience receives the argument only in the framing terms selected by the rhetor. Thus, the frames constitute interpretive devices that determine what is to be considered a problem, who is to be held accountable for it and what should be done about it.

Frames create salience of events through defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies about different matters in a manner similar with the four *stases*. Individuals frame their own experiences and these frames influence how they interpret frames in society. Therefore, frames are social instruments that allow people to maintain a shared interpretation of reality. The meaning of events is

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determined by imposing a certain frame on information (Zarefsky, 2014: 34). The most common climate change frames focus on consequences, responsibilities and solutions.

Climate change action is usually framed as adaptation or mitigation (Leal Filho *et alii*, 2019: 2). Mitigation refers to activities to reduce or prevent carbon emissions whereas adaptation refers to activities to adjust economic and social systems to the effects of climate change. Mitigation can account for human agency, addressing the main causes of climate change more than adaption, which seeks to decrease the risks, without causal intervention (Almiron & Xifra, 2020: 1).

Lexical selections are important in climate change communication, in that they can get to illumination and comprehension or to confusion and misunderstanding (Fløttum, 2017: 2). Some contrarian myths have emergedn around the vocabulary of human-driven climate change (Jacobs *et alii*, 2016: 40-41). Global warming (GW) used to be the preferred terminology of scientists, but was recently abandoned in favor of Climate Change (CC). Catastrophic anthropogenic global warming (CAGW) is the prevailing prediction of the scientific community which represents the basis for policy. Both of these myths cast doubt on the scientific community and those who communicate its results. The GW vs. CC myth portrays scientists as both incompetent (incorrect in their predictions of temperature evolution) and dishonest (engaging in revisionism by moving the goalposts in order to encompass unanticipated events). The CAGW myth portrays the mainstream scientists as doomsayers who are constantly rebuffed by subsequent studies within climate science field.

The rhetorical choices (ideographs) of words and metaphors employed in climate change communication indicate certain ideological perspectives and assumptions and activate specific interpretations (Hansen, 2019: 98). The downside of these rhetorical devices is that they determine various misconceptions (Armstrong *et alii*, 2018: 71). The rhetoric of loss activates a nostalgia of an idyllic, pure and pristine past (Hansen, 2019: 113). The rhetoric of calamity points to devastation. The rhetoric of unreason evokes conspiracies. Each type of rhetoric have corresponding narratives.

3. From apocalyptic rhetoric to rhetoric of ignorance

Apocalyptic rhetoric usually employs narratives pointing to a catastrophic moment in the future, a tragic ending of mankind through a global collapse (Pezzullo & Cox, 2022: 59-60). This threatening prediction tends to lose its capacity to create a sense of urgency over time. Moreover, the Giddens paradox shows that, regardless of how many warnings are communicated, people are reluctant to take action until some visible or tangible evidence of climate change becomes manifest, when it would be inherently too late (Arnold, 2018: 11). Apocalyptic messages tend to be counterproductive, to obscure distinctions and to engender fatalism (López, 2021: 1).

Apocalyptic framing of climate change not only frightens people with an imminent cataclysm but also helps the deniers to discredit climate scientists as alarmists or agitators (Garrard *et alii*, 2019: 107; Peeples & Murphy, 2023: 54). Predictions of doom leave people helpless or hopeless and decrease the public trust in the senders of those messages. Moreover, fear appeals can only work short term, otherwise the audiences become desensitized or disengaged (Arnold, 2028: 8).

Apocalyptic rhetoric is a pervasive and contentious frame in climate communication. There are two apocalyptic frames (O'Leary, 1994: 67-68): tragic (climate change as cosmic doom) and comic (climate change as a remediable human mistake). The first

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makes no place for human agency, whereas the second accounts for a limited human agency. Tragic apocalyptic discourse provides a coherent scheme, reassuring the audience that has lost control not by regaining it, but by invoking an inherent order of unfolding events (Brummett, 1991: 37). Comic apocalyptic discourse converts despair into hope, empowering people to take action.

Rhetoric is a form of social knowledge, but also a form of producing ignorance through misleading and confusing people (Stoner, 2020: 295-296). The matter is no longer the indifference to the confirmed scientifical information; it is the growing aversion to the established knowledge and the tendency to equalize expert and nonprofessional perspectives (Nichols, 2024: 21). The science surrounding climate change has been often under attack as uncertain. Rhetoric of ignorance (Stoner, 2021: 305-307) shows how rhetors construct uncertainty, confusion, and gullibility. Message content that often serves the construction of ignorance consists in erroneous and irrelevant information.

Erroneous information distorts data to create bias in the minds of the audience, by providing confusing or inaccurate information. For example, even if 97 percent consensus exists among climate scientists that humans are causing global warming, the public believes the degree of agreement among them is about 67 percent (Stoner, 2020: 307). Consequently, many people mistakenly think that there is significant disagreement among scientists on the issue. The deniers of anthropogenic climate change use this wrong perception (of 2/3 agreement among scientists) to argue that so much disagreement suggests the causes of climate change are other than human behavior.

Climate change deniers also take advantage of media giving promoters of contrary views on various issues opportunity to talk. This fake balance improperly gives disproportionate value to the perspectives of climate deniers. Moreover, the sheer presence of the climate change debate conveys the idea that there are two equally legitimate views on the matter. However, no real debate takes place because climate deniers not only use different analytical tools and belong to different discourse communities, but they also operate with different rhetorical visions, using *stases* in contrary manner (Damico *et alii*, 2018: 13). s. For example, they may agree on facts, definitions, even on the importance of the issue, but disagree on procedure. Climate change denial focuses on the conjecture, the anthropogenic causes and the seriousness of climate change, but its roots are ideological (Almiron & Xifra, 2020: 2).

Incompleteness is achieved by purposely concealing information to create confusion. In climate change communication, the primary means for creating ignorance by deniers is creation of doubt. Thus, self-imposed restrictions of science are turned into uncertainty about what exists, which is then used to question even the most solid scientific knowledge. Climate change deniers substitute the common meaning of uncertainty for the scientific meaning.

Often, uncertainty is a result of ambiguity wherein different interpretations of the same phenomenon are possible. However, creating ambiguity for self-interested control of others' interpretation of a situation can be misleading.

Vagueness may afford alternative interpretations useful for certain purposes. Vagueness takes advantage of receivers' candid efforts to make sense of a message

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and may succeed by intentionally avoiding guidance of interpretation so that desired conclusions, at least in some of the audience, will be drawn on their own accord.

Fuzziness determines tentative conclusions, either honest or deceptive.

Inaccurate information is the result of either error or misunderstanding (misinformation). However, it is often difficult to distinguish misinformation from disinformation.

Finally, irrelevant information only adds pointless data to the debate. The audience should determine what information is valid and what should be ignored.

Anthropogenic climate change deniers employ five main rhetorical tactics (McIntyre, 2021: 33-45): selective evidence (cherry-picking); conspiracy theories; reliance on fake experts and denigration of real experts; fallacious reasoning; and unrealistic expectations of certainty from science. Selective evidence uses anecdotes and indolent inductive reasoning to mislead. Conspiracy theories pretend to disclose covert actions without real proof through quote mining. Reliance on fake experts employs declarations of large numbers of scientists from different fields, magnified minorities and fake debate. Fallacious reasoning exploits *ad hominem* claims, ambiguity, false analogy, misrepresentation, straw man, oversimplification, false choice, red herrings and slippery slope. Unrealistic expectations of certainty from science distorts perceptions on climate change by moving the goalposts (Cook, 2020: 66-72).

4. Ecomedia literacy as a remedy in climate change communication

Both apocalyptic rhetoric and rhetoric of ignorance pollute news and climate change communication, inducing people to adopt false or exaggerated beliefs. One of the antidotes for these two distortions is media literacy. Critical media literacy can help news consumers in developing resilience to deceptive rhetorical tactics about various topics, including climate change (Kellner & Share, 2019: 90).

Ecomedia literacy concerns environmental communication on four main areas: media language used to convey meaning; representation of people, events and ideas; content production in terms of people, technologies and organizations; and audience as communication target, interpreter and agent of change (López, 2021: 235-236). Media language is never neutral, but ideologically loaded, and, therefore, persuasive, even deceptive. People, events and ideas are often represented by media in stereotypical manners, by using frames and vocabularies apt to promote certain interpretations. Content production is constrained by individuals and groups, technological and organizational media logics, within an intricate communication ecosystem (ecomediasphere). creating messages not only addressing to but also creating audiences. Audiences are more active, complex and selective in terms of media consumption and social behavior, but the contentious issues tend to polarize them.

There are three main aspects of this ecomedia literacy: source of messages; content; and purpose (Damico *et alii*, 2018: 12). The sources of messages have different competencies and interests but also levels of trustworthiness and biases. Content must be evaluated for accuracy, argumentation and balance, from multiple sources. Purpose is the most difficult to determine, since it can be overt, but mostly is, at least in part, disguised.

The main role of ecomedia literacy is to educate and motivate people to make informed decisions and beliefs, based on credible, scientific information and to resist disinformation and manipulation attempts concerning climate change, on both sides of

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the discussion. Only through debate people can become aware of the taken for granted ideological assumptions and embedded biases not only of their opponents, but also of their own.

5. Conclusions

Climate change communication is mostly inadequate and ineffective when it uses scare tactics, such as apocalyptic rhetoric. Apocalyptic rhetoric can obstruct effective communication, by inducing doubt and rejection. Climate change communication uses different frames, rhetorical devices and lexical choices. Rhetoric can promote knowledge, but also ignorance, used by climate change deniers to undermine scientific expertise through distorted, ambiguous, incomplete or irrelevant information. Anthropogenic climate change deniers employ five main rhetorical tactics selective evidence, conspiracy theories, reliance on fake experts, fallacious reasoning and unrealistic expectations from science.

Both apocalyptic rhetoric and rhetoric of ignorance contaminate climate change content, inducing people to embrace erroneous or excessive beliefs. One of the antidotes for these two distortions is media literacy. Ecomedia literacy can help news consumers in developing resilience to deceptive rhetorical tactics, and in making insightful decisions and beliefs, grounded on reliable, scientific information by asking relevant questions on media content and purpose.

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